

W. M. AKHURST

(1822-1878). One of the most prolific and significant popular culture dramatists working in Australia during the nineteenth century, William Mower Akhurst wrote and directed numerous musical comedies, pantomimes, burlesques operettas and farces after arriving in Australia in 1849. The string of hits he produced subsequently served as a major incentive for the Australian writers who began to emerge in the 1860s and 1870s. He returned to England in 1869 hoping to re-establish his career there but could not garner anywhere near the same level of critical and commercial success as he had in Australia. Akhurst died at sea in 1878, three weeks after setting out from England for Australia.

Described in one source as a "thorough Bohemian in his habits and a most genial companion,"¹ William Mower Akhurst is regarded as the first Australian-resident dramatist to have a significant impact on the local popular theatre industry. While almost all of his Australian-written works were staged in Melbourne, these were produced during an unprecedented time of growth and fortune-making in the country, and in Victoria in particular. His popularity was such that for some fifteen years he was the only local writer able to match and even surpass the success of foreign dramatic imports. Despite being relegated almost to a footnote in Australian theatre history his legacy of work still ranks among the most successful the country has produced.

Born in Hammersmith, London on 29 December 1822, Akhurst's early career included writing and producing shows at London's Cremorne Gardens (where at least two of his works were staged). In late-1849, the year before gold was discovered in Australia, Akhurst left Britain for the colonies. He found initial employment in Adelaide as a journalist and is believed to have also spent some time on diggings at Barker's and Forest creeks near Castlemaine. Sometime in 1853 he moved to Melbourne where he was employed by the *Argus*² as sub-editor and music/drama critic. At the same time he involved himself in the local theatre, and quickly established a reputation as one of the city's leading creators of popular theatre, writing, adapting, localising and/or arranging material for pantomimes, burlesques, musical farces, minstrel shows, musical entertainments and operettas, and with occasional forays into non-musical drama, including, for example, *The Poor of Melbourne* (1863). In addition to writing the texts, Akhurst often composed songs for specific performers or scenes, and is known to have arranged the music for a number of productions. The music he wrote for a ballad and a polka, for instance, were published in the July-August 1863 edition of *Illustrated Melbourne Post*. An original waltz was included in an 1864 edition of the same magazine. The libretti for some of his pantomimes were also published in Melbourne during the 1860s.

Akhurst's first Australian works were written primarily for the Nelson and Buckingham families (ca. 1853). His creative output around this time included several collaborative efforts with composer [Sydney Nelson](#). During the late-1850s and early-1860s Akhurst also established professional relationship with [George Coppin](#) and his brother [Frederick Coppin](#). Two notable productions were the music comedy *Coppin in Cairo* (1858) and the farce "We've Taken Gardiner" (1862). Another collaborator was F.M. Soutten, with whom he adapted the farce "The Battle of Melbourne" (1854). Akhurst's first pantomime was *Harlequin LSD* (1855), and this was followed on a regular basis throughout the next decade and a half. All had strong topical interest in them, containing frequent allusions to Melbourne and Victorian personalities, issues, localities and circumstances. In 1862 Akhurst devised the *Harlequin Arabian Nights* pantomime for W.S. Lyster's Royal English and Italian Opera Company, and around this time, too, provided operatic burlesques for the [Christy's Minstrels](#). In 1868 he adapted the libretto for Jacques Offenbach's operetta *Un Mari Á La Porte* (libretto by A. Delacour and L. Morand), calling his version *The Wrong Side of the Door*.

William Akhurst's career was without doubt one of distinction, unfolding as it did during a period when one week seasons of local works were considered a triumph. His works, and particularly his pantomimes, invariably exceeded the average season. The *Brisbane Courier* records that Akhurst's creative gift was his ability to rhyme and "his faculty for making word-torturing puns - with which burlesques were crammed at the period he wrote."³ Aside from his own occasional compositions, the majority of his musical numbers were adapted from light operas or popular songs, into which he inserted new words in accordance with the dramatic action. Two of Akhurst's longest running works were the burlesques *Ixion* (1866) which had a run of 47 performances, and the 1868 production, *Paris the Prince and Helen the Fair* (aka *The Siege of Troy*), which exceeded the *Ixion* season by several performances. Nellie Stewart, in her autobiography *My Life's Story*, recalls that he "was responsible for the introduction of all the latest comic opera



Source: National Library of Australia

¹ "Music and Drama," 12. [see Further Reference section for full citation details and link to digitised version of this article]

² Some sources indicate that Akhurst was employed by the *Melbourne Herald*.

³ "Music and Drama," 12.

successes from Paris and London into *The Siege of Troy* long before the operas were staged in Australia [and that] the music of *The Grand Duchess* was used, almost in its entirety in his [1868] burlesque of *King Arthur*.⁴ Several of Akhurst's works were also adapted by other local writers and producers, including two versions of *The House that Jack Built* (1869) - these being *Jack Sydney* (1871) and *Jack Brisbane* (1878) - and *Harlequin Jack Sheppard* (1869), staged as *Sambodom and Pompedom's Dream* that same year by Weston and Hussey. One of his final successes in Australia was *The Battle of Hastings* (1869), which some theatre historians have suggest firmly establish the popularity of extravaganzas in Melbourne.

BEAUTIFUL SWELLS
Celebrated Duet

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AND
MISS MARION DUNN

IN MR. W. M. AKHURST'S
BURLESQUE EXTRAVAGANZA,
KING ARTHUR
PERFORMED AT THE THEATRE ROYAL
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My dear Girls
she's a
Pal of Mine

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THE WORDS BY
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That Jack Built;**
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HARLEQUIN PROGRESS,
AND THE
Love's Laughs, Laments and Labors,
OF
JACK MELBOURNE,
AND
LITTLE VICTORIA.

A FAIRY EXTRAVAGANZA OPENING TO FANTOMIME,
By W. M. AKHURST,
Author of "Seige of Troy," "King Arthur," "Battle of Hastings,"
"Robinson Crusoe," &c. &c.

THE PROPERTY OF THE MANAGERS, BY WHOM ALL RIGHTS
ARE RESERVED.

Produced at the Theatre Royal, Melbourne, December, 1869, under
the Management of Messrs. Harwood, Stewart, Hennings & Coppin.

Melbourne:
H. CORDELL, PRINTER, 30, FLINDERS LANE WEST.

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THE ILLUSTRATED MELBOURNE POST.
THE ACACIA WALTZ;
No. 1. W. M. AKHURST.

No. 2.

Printed and published, for the Proprietors, by ROBERT STEWART, at THE HERALD OFFICE, No. 7 BUCKLE STREET, MELBOURNE.

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In 1869 Akhurst returned to Britain where he wrote a number of works for Astley's Amphitheatre, the Pavilion and the Elephant and Castle Theatre - including at least nine pantomimes, four dramas, two extravaganzas, one burlesque and several equestrian spectacles for Lord George Sanger (Astley's Theatre). One of these, an extravaganza entitled *To the Green Isles Direct* (1874) which he adapted from Lecoq's 1872 opera *Les Cents Vierges*, was staged in London on 25 May 1874. The following year it was accepted for production in Australia by W.S. Lyster and Henry Bracy - but retitled *Les Cent Vierges (The One Hundred Virgins)*. Akhurst's London productions were not as well received as they had been in Australia, however. With his health gradually deteriorating, and with the success he had received in Australia most likely playing on his mind, Akhurst decided to return to Melbourne in the hope he might recapture the success he had attained there. However, on 6 June 1878 while three weeks out to sea aboard the S.S. Patriarch, he collapsed and died of apparent brain paralysis. His wife, Ellen, returned to Australia and spent the remainder of her life living in Melbourne. She died at St Kilda on 12 August 1915.

MUSIC THEATRE WORKS

- 1853:** *The Ladies Prerogative* [musical farce] • *Quiet Colonial* [musical entertainment] • *Romance and Reality* [musical entertainment]
- 1854:** *The Rights of Women* [burletta]
- 1855:** *Rolla of Ours* [burlesque] • *The Mirror of Beauty* [burlesque] • *Harlequin LSD* [pantomime]
- 1856:** *Troubles of Matrimony* [entertainment] • *Multiplication is Vexation, Division is a Bad* [pantomime]
- 1857:** *The Fall of Sebastopol* [play with music] • *Harlequin Whittington and His Cat* [pantomime]
- 1858:** *Coppin in Cairo* [comic play with music] • *Harlequin Robin Hood* [pantomime]
- 1859:** *Yellow Dwarf* [burlesque]
- 1860:** *The Nymph of Lurlyburg* [burlesque] • *The Forty Thieves* [burlesque]
- 1861:** *Little Jack Horner, The Original Hero of the Corner* [pantomime] • *The Queen of Beauty Who Had a Fight with the Genii* [burlesque] • *Harlequin Valentine and Orson* [pantomime]
- 1862:** *Harlequin Arabian Knights* [pantomime]
- 1864:** *The Last of the Ogres* [burlesque]
- 1865:** *Massaniello* [burlesque] • *Faust M.D.* [burlesque] • *Harlequin Baron Munchausen* [pantomime]
- 1866:** *L'Africaine* [burlesque] • *Maritana* [burlesque] • *Ixion* [burlesque] • *Gulliver on His Travels* [pantomime]
- 1867:** *Tom Tom the Piper's Son and Mary Mary Quite Contrary* [pantomime]
- 1868:** *Paris the Prince and Helen the Fair* (aka THE SIEGE OF TROY) [burlesque] • *King Arthur* [burlesque] • *The Wrong Side of the Door* [operetta] • *Harlequin Robinson Crusoe* [pantomime]
- 1869:** *The Battle of Hastings* [burlesque] • *Harlequin Jack Sheppard* [pantomime] • *The House that Jack Built* [pantomime]
- 1874:** *To the Green Isles Direct* (aka *Les Cent Vierges*) [opera bouffe]

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FIRST Night of a New Piece entitled the "Rights of Woman," Mechanics' Institution.
The Nelson Family's Musical Entertainment, this evening, Monday, July 24th, 1854.

Programme.

Part I.
 Quartette—The Vintagers ... The Misses and Messrs. S. and A. Nelson ... Nelson.
 Song—Live and Let Live ... Mr. S. Nelson Nelson.
 Duet—Guadalquivir ... The Misses Nelson.
 Song—Calm the Cellarer Mr. A. Nelson Nelson.
 Falsetto—Constance ... Miss Nelson ... Linley.
 Duet—When thy bosom ... Miss Nelson Nelson.
 and Mr. S. Nelson ... Brahan.
 Song—Little Goodie Gay ... Miss C. Nelson Nelson.
 Glee—The Gipsies ... The Misses and Messrs. S. and A. Nelson. ... Nelson.
 An interval of fifteen minutes.

Part II.

To conclude with (1st time an entirely original) act, letta, by the author of "Quite Colonial," "Romance and Reality," etc., entitled

"THE RIGHTS OF WOMAN!"

The music composed and arranged by Mr. S. Nelson.

Human beings—

Julian Vincent ... A bric-a-brac barrister, out of town for the sake of quiet, and to escape from the sheriff's delicate attention. In the course of the piece his circumstances alter, and he gets up a declaration ... Miss A. Nelson
 Miss Blanche Evans ... A strong-minded young lady, a pupil of the New Age, and a firm supporter of the "Rights of Woman." ... Miss Nelson
 Cora Perks ... Waitress at the Hippopotamus Hotel, a lover of long chins, and of one Habakkuk, who is invisible Miss C. Nelson
 A Voice ... Supposed to be that of Tap, a sheriff's officer, and which is at first considered foreign to the subject, but eventually contributes to a happy denouement. ... Miss C. Nelson
 Scene.—A chamber on the first floor at the Hippopotamus Hotel, with a perspective view of a shoring beam, and of the other side of the way.
 Incidental Music.
 Recitative and Air—What life as a poor Little Maid ... Miss C. Nelson
 Song—Woman's Rights ... Miss Nelson
 Duet—Stay and let me hear my ... Miss Nelson and Mr. ... A. Nelson
 Duet Medley—There's the Clock and the Cream Jug Miss C. or Mr. Nelson.
 Finale—Away with idle fantasies
 Mr. S. Nelson will preside at the Pianoforte.
 Doors open at half-past Seven, to commence at Eight o'clock.
 Admission: Five Shillings each.
 Members admitted at half-price on production of old tickets.

Argus (Melbourne) 24 July 1854, 8.

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Manager and Director, Mr. R. Younge.
EASTER MONDAY.

First Night in the Australian Colonies of Planche's celebrated Extravaganza entitled the **YELLOW DWARF.**

MISS KATE WARDE,

Who is engaged for a limited period, will make her first appearance at this Theatre as Carlos the Little Devil, and the Princess Allfair, in the Extravaganza.

On **MONDAY EVENING, APRIL 25,**

Will be presented the Comic Drama, in Two Acts, by Thomas Archer, Esq., entitled **ASMODEUS.**

To conclude with, for the first time here, J. R. Planche's Fairy Extravaganza, with Local Allusions interspersed, entitled the

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With new and gorgeous scenery by Mr. William Pitt, Mr. W. J. Wilson, and Herr Habbe.

Machinists, Messrs. Charles and Figgins.

Properties and Tricks by Mr. James Brogden.

Dresses by Mrs. Jagar and Mrs. Earl.

The Overture, Songs, and Incidental Music selected and arranged by Mr. F. Coppin.

The whole produced under the direction of Mr. R. Younge.

Doors open at 7 o'clock; the curtain to rise at half-past 7 precisely.

Argus (Melbourne) 25 Apr. 1859, 8.

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Sole Lessee ... Mr. Hoskins.
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Or,

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Prince Amiable (a most elegant Young Prince, and the flower of his Father's Flock),

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Dress-circle, 5s.; stalls, 3s.; upper circle, 2s.; pit, 1s.

Argus (Melbourne) 26 Dec. 1864, 8.

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